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SUBJECT: POOR TEST RESULTS STARTS TEACHERS, UNION ON SLOW
ROAD TO CHANGE

REF: MEXICO 1540

1. Summary: This past May Mexico's Secretary of Public Education (SEP) and the National Teachers Union (SNTE) signed an agreement called the Alliance for Quality Education. One of the main elements of this agreement stipulated that applicants for teaching positions in Mexico's public schools would have to pass an exam to prove their qualifications before being hired. On August 11, the first ever national exam was given to determine the qualifications of over 71,000 aspiring teachers. To the surprise of many and the shock of the general public a full 68 percent of those who took the exam failed. The exam was also given to over 17,500 teachers who had been hired but not yet given tenured positions. Only 7,150 of these untenured teachers passed the exam. The quality of public education in Mexico has long been criticized for a variety of reasons. Much of this criticism has focused on a teachers union that was over politicized and whose members were under prepared to actually teach. Following the announcement of the poor exam results the SEP and the SNTE announced plans to work together to retrain and re-test Mexico's public school teachers. Mexico's National Teachers Union is the largest single labor organization in Latin American with an estimated 1.5 million members. It is hoped that the re-training program the SEP and (in principal) the SNTE plan to implement will result in a more professionalized core of public school teachers in approximately seven years. End Summary

MEXICO,S NATIONAL TEACHERS, UNION

2. Mexico's National Teacher Union (SNTE) is the larger of the country's two education workers unions. The SNTE is estimated to have roughly 1.5 million members and is widely recognized as being the largest single labor union in Latin America. The SNTE is headed by its national President, Elba Ester Gordillo Morales; a controversial figure often accused of being more interested in furthering the interests of a corrupt union than in dealing with the many problems facing Mexico's public school system. Gordillo is often referred to as either Elba Ester or more often than not simply as the Teacher. She is an extremely powerful union leader whose influence extends far beyond the realms of either education or organized labor.

3. One of the many criticisms leveled at Gordillo is that she has over politicized the SNTE and done nothing to halt, much less reverse, blatant corruption in the union. (Comment:

The SNTE has been accused of such things as buying and selling teaching positions, misuse of union funds, demanding sexual favors in order to be hired or tenured to mention just some of its alleged transgressions.) No objective observer could deny that the SNTE is a very political union but, to be fair to the Teacher8, it was a highly politicized organization before she became its leader. It would probably be more accurate to say that she adroitly took full advantage of a pre-existing situation that many say allowed her and her supporters within the SNTE to amass considerable wealth and political power. The undeniable rise in her personal wealth and political power notwithstanding and despite widespread comments to the contrary, the Teacher8 rarely fails to maintain a hands-on approach to education related issues in Mexico. Consequently, it was not particularly surprising when, in her capacity as the SNTE President, she entered into a potentially significant new agreement with the Mexican Government,s Secretary of Public Education (SEP) this past May.

AN AGREEMENT FOR BETTER TEACHERS

14. On May 15, 2008, Teachers Day8, Mexican President Felipe Calderon unveiled an Alliance for Quality Education8 (REF) between his government,s SEP and the SNTE. The stated aim of the alliance was to improve the quality of Mexican public education, school infrastructure and teachers' skills based on five elements: (1) modernization of schools, (2) renewal of teachers' selection and promotion processes, (3) implementation of scholarships and nutritional programs,

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(4) curriculum reform, (5) and improvement of the national education system for teachers and students. Although it was not particularly noted at the time, the most far reaching of these elements may be the one concerning teacher selection and promotion.

15. In their discussions on how to implement the various elements of the Alliance the SEP and the SNTE committed themselves to hiring new teachers based on the results of public national competitions (exams) and also to tenure and promote based on professional merit. The SNTE/SEP agreement called for the first of these exams (a National Exam of Teaching Abilities and Competencies8) to be held in August, prior to the start of the new school year. To their credit, the SNTE and SEP worked cooperatively together to develop this first of its type exam ever given in Mexico, organized the administration of the exam and then, as promised, arranged for nearly 90,000 people to take it before the start of the school year. The SEP and the SNTE were justifiably pleased with their accomplishment; but only for a short while.

EXAM RESULTS GET POSTED

16. The SEP and SNTE moved very quickly to grade and then make available to the public in as transparent a process as possible the results of this exam to determine which aspirants met the qualification for employment as a public school teacher. Some 71,000 candidates for a much smaller number of teaching positions signed up for and took the exam. In theory, all of these aspirants had successfully graduated from one of the many Normal8 schools that Mexico has used to train new teachers for at least the past 70 years. Unfortunately for all concerned, the results of the exam came as an extremely unpleasant surprise. Fully 68 percent of all those taking the exam failed. Not only that, but an additional 17,648 previously hired but as yet untenured teachers also took the exam and all but 7,150 of them failed the test as well.

¶7. The public reaction to these shocking exam results was quick and sharp. Parents associations, the press and a broad range of education activists were shocked and appalled that so many aspiring teachers, who had presumably graduated with some form of degree in education, had failed their entrance exams. The press and the general public were particularly outraged to learn that the SEP had no immediate plans to terminate the employment of the untenured teachers who had already started working in the public school systems and who were scheduled to be placed in classes teaching students at the start of the current school year. The states that had the highest percentages of perspective teachers who failed to pass the exam were Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Sonora, Edomex (Mexico State) and Baja California.

¶8. Sharp criticism from almost all sides was leveled at the SNTE who immediately pointed its collective finger at the SEP. A convincing case could be made for the criticism leveled at the SNTE and for the union's accusations against the SEP. Alas for the union, because of its already poor image and that of its national leader, &the Teacher8, few (if any) in the Mexican public were inclined to give it the benefit of the doubt.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

¶9. Faced with a situation in which nearly two-thirds of the applicants for public school teaching positions where demonstrably shown to be unqualified the SEP had to decide what to do next. Given the fanfare with which the GOM unveiled the &Alliance for Quality Education8 its options regarding what to do about the job seekers who had failed to pass the exam were extremely limited. The SEP committed itself to only hiring teachers based on the results of a public and transparent exam process and so far it is holding firm to that commitment. Several days after the release of the exam results the SEP declared that no one who had failed it would be offered a teaching position. Moreover, the SEP stated that those who failed the exam would not be allowed to

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retake it again this year. (Comment: Post notes that thus far the SEP has not commented publicly about what it intends to do with the thousands of hired but untenured teachers who failed to pass the exam.)

¶10. Although the SEP declared that the applicants for teaching positions who failed to pass the exam would not be allowed to retake it again this year it did indicate that they could be retested again next year. It also acknowledged that the results of the exam would tend to indicate that many teachers who have been hired and tenured in recent years were probably not the best-qualified applicants. Consequently, the SEP is planning to institute a training program that will allow currently employed teachers to upgrade their job knowledge and skills. The SEP believes that it can train (or re-train as the case may be) upwards of 150,000 teachers per year of the estimated 1.5 million person employed as instructors in Mexico's public schools. At that rate the SEP hopes that once normal retirement, job changers and new hires (who have passed the exam) are taken into account, its efforts will result in a more professionalized core of public school teachers in approximately seven years.

COMMENT

¶11. No matter how one looks at it the fact that nearly 70 percent of the persons seeking teaching positions, as public school teachers could not pass what was essentially an entrance exam was an embarrassment for all concerned. It is noteworthy that the SNTE did not dispute the disappointing results of the exam. Perhaps this was because the union

itself helped developed the exam. The SNTE,s quiet acquiescence to the exam results may also be attributable to the fact that the vast majority of those who failed it were individuals applying to become public school teachers and were not yet actual members of the profession and by extension members of the National Teachers Union. There are many SNTE members at the state level all across Mexico who are not happy with the changes they see coming, like the exam, as a result of the &Alliance for Quality Education8 which will alter the way things have traditionally been done in the National Teachers Union. The degree of state level discontent is large and it appears to be growing but so far the national leadership of the SNTE, and that includes &the Teacher8, has done nothing to encourage this discontent or to back away from the agreement they made with the GOM. If the SNTE leadership continues to live up to its commitment to the Alliance this may well be the beginning of at least some level of positive change in the National Teacher Union and in Mexico,s public school system.

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